YUGOSLAVIA: THE NON-LENINIST SUCCESSION

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Bogdan Denitch recently noted that "a great deal of nonsense has been written on the subject of stability in post-Tito Yugoslavia...." [2] Endorsing this viewpoint, I would note that the general inability to think very sensibly about the post-Tito succession in Yugoslavia is part and parcel of a generally poor Western record of analyzing changes in the Yugoslav political system. The Yugoslav system must be understood in its own terms, as a sui generis development which began haltingly after 1948 and which has proceeded apace over the past 15 years. Much Western misunderstanding of developments in Yugoslavia can be traced back to what Denitch calls the "Soviet paradigm." That paradigm implies a "Leninist succession" - the unregularized transfer of political power from a deceased or deposed Communist leader to a successor, who usually emerges from a group of the former top leader's associates through control over the central Party apparatus. Closely related to the "Soviet paradigm" is the notion of "leaderism" and the assumption that only the emergence of a single dominant political personality with longevity is compatible with the perpetuation of the political system. Both notions,

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[1] Paper prepared for the Panel on "Transfer of Power in Communist Systems," 1979 APSA Annual Convention, Washington, D.C., September 3, 1979.

[2] Bogdan Denitch, "Succession and Stability in Yugoslavia," Journal of International Affairs, fall/winter 1978, pp. 223-238.

it seems to me, are quite inappropriate to the Yugoslav system of 1979. Attempts to forecast the Tito succession through the prisms of "Leninism" and "leaderism" will result in serious analytic distortions.

The Yugoslav Communist system was once, to be sure, a Leninist system, and the Leninist model of political succession did apply. As late as the mid-1960s, there was a single heir-apparent, Aleksandar Rankovic, who owed his position (apart from his wartime association with Tito) to his control over the Party's organizational levers of power as Central Committee Secretary responsible for organizational and cadre questions and as former chief of the secret police. But since the late 1960s, the Yugoslav system, and the resulting prospects for political succession, have changed profoundly -- for reasons to be reviewed shortly. At the end of the 1960s, Tito himself recognized the imperative of a new approach to the succession issue. Expressing these concerns, [1] Tito initiated and oversaw the construction of new, less personalized mechanisms intended to provide Yugoslavia with leadership "after Tito." The resulting process has now been underway for about a decade and, I would argue, has (particularly in the past year) achieved considerable success.

This paper can only outline the highlights of that process. In the late 1960s, "rotation of cadres" was emphasized. The resulting personnel turnover forced the retirement of many of the wartime "old guard" and first established the principle (only sporadically observed at the outset) that terms of office in the Party, state, and "self-

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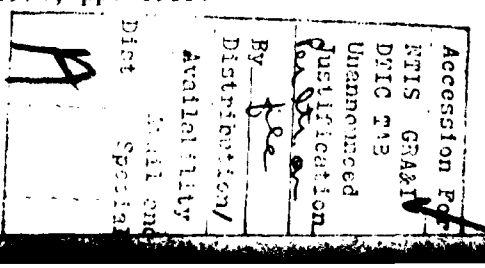
[1] "Much has been written abroad about Yugoslavia disintegrating when I go. In Yugoslavia, there have been too many various conjectures about who will take my place . . ." (Tito, Speech of September 21, 1970)

management" bureaucracies should be limited. Beginning in 1970, new, "proto-successionist" institutions were established, especially the collective State Presidency. That body was composed of representatives from each of the republics and provinces; the position of vice-president, under Tito, has rotated yearly among the regional representations. Reorganization of top Party bodies at the time - especially reconstitution of the Party Presidium on a similar representational basis and the announced limitation of the Presidium Executive Committee Secretary's term to two years -- portended an analogous tendency on the Party level as well.

The process of creating new kinds of successionist institutions was temporarily cut short by the post-1971 political turmoil in Yugoslavia that followed Tito's belated crackdown on the Croatian Party leadership for "nationalism" and the subsequent partial reconsolidation of a federal Party center in Belgrade. Some observers interpreted these developments as a "return to Leninism" and saw Stane Dolanc's consolidation of his political position as Executive Committee Secretary (the two-year rotation rule notwithstanding) as a harbinger of a more traditional pattern of Leninist succession in Yugoslavia.

But, as I have argued elsewhere, [1] the process of recentralization and "re-Leninization" in the early 1970s was far weaker than often assumed in Western appraisals. Developments since 1974 have, I submit, borne out this viewpoint. At the Eleventh Congress of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia (LCY) in mid-1978, the top Party

[1] A. Ross Johnson, "Yugoslavia: In the Twilight of Tito," The Washington Papers, No. 16, 1974, pp. 19ff.



organs were further reorganized to stress their multinational representational and collegial character; in organizational terms, most important was the dismantling of the Executive Committee as the executive organ of the federal Party Presidium, which was itself reduced in size. The collective nature of the Presidium was emphasized in its Standing Rules, adopted in October 1978. In late 1978, Tito sought to give more meaningful content to the new forms by launching a campaign for "collective leadership" throughout Yugoslav society. Tito's initiative, quickly accepted as dogma, involved three distinct components -- rotation of leadership positions, usually yearly and with strict respect to sequential national representation; collective responsibility of all the members of a leadership body for its work, rather than de facto delegation of responsibility "by sectors"; and creation of regularized procedures for the work of leadership organs. Key federal posts were occupied by new republican Party personalities, especially Mikulic from Bosnia and Dragosavac from Croatia, while Dolanc gave up his secretaryship. The strict rule of rotation on a republican basis of leading posts, applied earlier to the State Presidency, was extended to the top Party bodies.

To date the dominant viewpoint in Western analyses has been to dismiss these initiatives as window-dressing. Such an astute observer of Yugoslavia as Paul Lendvai has, for example, described "collective leadership" as a sham - a facade behind which traditional personal power struggles continue.[1] Yet taken together, the developments initiated at

[1] Dispatch by Paul Lendvai in The Financial Times, February 21, 1979.

the Eleventh Congress arguably constitute the most significant political development in Yugoslavia since the initial challenge to centralism in the early 1960s. For the organizational changes enacted at the Eleventh Congress and the subsequent efforts, spearheaded by Tito, to regularize and depersonalize their operations constitute the first real effort in post-war Yugoslavia (and the first attempt in any Communist system) to establish "rules of the game" in Party decisionmaking bodies intended to apply to the succession period. As such, the developments are truly revolutionary, and constitute perhaps Tito's crowning achievement in attempting to prepare Yugoslavia for his departure.

To be sure, the operation of the new institutions and "rules of the game" remain to be tested - not only "after Tito" but under his leadership as well. Yet the new mechanisms and procedures do constitute more then window dressing -- not because of the personal proclivities of Tito's lieutenants toward compromise solutions (although that factor should not be ignored) but because they correspond to the reality of decentralized political power in Yugoslavia.

The extent to which Yugoslavia has become a quasi-confederal political system is, even today, not very well appreciated in the West. Since the late 1960s, political power in Yugoslavia has devolved from the former centralized Party apparatus in Belgrade to the LCY's constituent republican and provincial suborganizations, themselves arguably still quasi-Leninist. [1] This devolution of political power --

[1] It is assumption, not empirical analysis, that the republican Party organizations are still "quasi-Leninist." Almost no analytical attention has been paid to the organization and operation of the republican and provincial Parties - along with the military, the key political actors in contemporary Yugoslavia.

a process I have outlined elsewhere [1] -- has involved the "republicanization" of the Yugoslav political system. The process has, to be sure, proceeded in fits and starts. The rampant decentralization circa 1970 was halted and in some areas partly reversed after 1971; at the Tenth LCY Congress in 1974, a new balance was struck between the authority of the federal Party organs in Belgrade and the powers of the LCY's constituent suborganizations.

Yet even in 1974, this balance could not adequately be characterized as "recentralization," as testified to, for example, by the fact that centralized nomenklatura and cadre supervision functions, which had been dismantled at the end of the 1960s, were never resurrected. And since 1974, there has been a further effective devolution of political power from the LCY center to the republican and provincial LCY organizations (without the explicit nationalist overtones so evident at the turn of the decade). Today, in real political terms Yugoslavia is, in many respects, a confederal state -- perhaps the best extant case of such a state. Decisionmaking in federal bodies has increasingly become a matter of bargaining among shifting republican coalitions, themselves responsive (in greater and lesser degrees) to guidance from the respective republican and provincial LCY organizations.

This interrepublican bargaining is most evident today in the economic sphere. To cite two recent examples, the province of Vojvodina, acting alone, vetoed draft energy legislation prohibiting liquid fuel power plant construction (Vojvodina has oil reserves and argued that

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[1] "Yugoslavia: In the Twilight of Tito."

such legislation would unduly constrict its industrial development), while the province of Kosovo joined the republic of Macedonia in forcing a reconsideration of the federal budget (arguing that anticipated contributions of the poorer "Southern" regions were excessive).

It is this reality of a decentralized political system and a quasi-confederal state, based on the restructuring of the League of Communists itself into a more federal or even confederal organization, that precludes a "Leninist" succession in Yugoslavia. Tito's unique charisma and authority could not in any event have been enjoyed by any successor - even in a centralized political system. With the dilution of centralism in the mid-1960s, the prospect of Tito being succeeded by any single successor, any "strong man," has been negligible. For a preeminent leader could succeed Tito only on the basis of a centralized political apparatus that has been progressively dismantled over the past 15 years and which, I would contend, cannot be reconstructed (in the absence of a major discontinuity involving domestic violence and, probably, Soviet intervention) in view of Yugoslavia's complex multinational composition.[1]

Indeed, the incongruity between Yugoslavia's decentralized political system and a preeminent successor to Tito is by now well enough appreciated to be a strawman. What has in fact been assumed in

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[1] Supra-national "Yugoslavism" was a credible platform for the Communist Party of Yugoslavia that emerged victorious from the Partisan War in large measure because of its slogan "brotherhood and unity" and that could employ revolutionary measures to create a new Yugoslav state after 1945. Today, as LCY leaders freely admit, "supra-national" centralized Yugoslavism can only constitute a facade for Great-Serbianism and would thus lead (quoting the senior Croatian Party leader Vladimir Bakaric) to "civil war."

some Western appraisals is a primus inter pares with longevity; this prospect too, it seems to me, is an unlikely Yugoslav "future." The Yugoslav system "after Tito" will have to accommodate the interests of the League of Communists' constituent republican and provincial suborganizations. A structure of multiple forums has been erected for the expression and reconciliation of these various interests; in these multiple forums, shifting coalitions of republican interests have emerged on different issues. It is within this system, not outside it, that personal as well as political antagonisms will contend "after Tito."

There are multiple incentives for this to in fact happen. The incompatibility of a "strong man" with the decentralized Yugoslav system that lacks a centralized cadre control apparatus has been noted. It is a plus that interests of Yugoslavia's constituent republics are multiple, and not polarized between Serbs and Croats as in interwar Yugoslavia; on one occasion (to cite a real example) Macedonia may ally with Kosovo on an economic issue, while on another occasion it may "oppose" Kosovo, in alliance with Slovenia, on a cultural/linguistic issue. In a more positive sense, new multiple forums and "rules of the game" have been created that are today (to be sure, under Tito) serving to reconcile various regional and national interests in a noncoercive manner. These institutions and procedures respect -- to the extreme, for many outside observers -- the interests of Yugoslavia's multiple national and ethnic groups, as espoused by the respective republican and provincial Party organizations. They provide a structure for the operationalization of the inter-republican Yugoslavism which is both present reality and the only basis on which an integral Yugoslav state can be maintained.

In one of the few recent efforts to deal with the Tito succession in conceptual terms, William Zimmerman counterposed a "consensual Presidency" model to a "coordinative Leninist Party" model and argued the utility of the latter. Both models, it seems to me, mislead more than they illuminate. [1] For a "consensual Presidency" model overemphasizes the role of the state Presidency as a forum (as opposed to other federal bodies, especially the LCY Presidium) and understates the role of the republican/provincial LCY organizations as the effective spokesmen of regional interests. The "coordinative Leninist Party" model overstates both the degree of centralism and the "Leninist" character of the League of Communists. We should not anticipate neither a collegium of "Yugoslav" leaders nor a coordinative Leninist party dominated by a leader or group of leaders at the center to succeed Tito.

After Tito, Yugoslavia promises yet another of the many political and social experiments it has undertaken under Tito's guidance since 1948 -- in this case a non-Leninist succession. Rather than the emergence after Tito of a preeminent leader with longevity, we should anticipate a political process involving the actions in multiple overlapping institutions of a number of political personalities emerging from the republican and provincial Party organizations, some of whom achieve federal stature but only on the basis of continued ties to their parent regions and Party organizations. The residual central Party bodies may play a role, but not a dominant one (and least of all an

[1] See William Zimmerman, "The Tito Succession and the Evolution of Yugoslav Politics," Studies in Comparative Communism, spring/summer, 1976, and my comment, "Is Yugoslavia Leninist?", in Studies in Comparative Communism, winter 1977.

exclusive one), as the organizational base for personal power. The constituent republican Party organizations (along with the army Party organization) will remain the key actors in the succession. [1] Tito will be "succeeded" by a "polycentric polyarchy." [2]

The operation of the system can be tested only "after Tito." The obstacles to the exercise of effective all-Yugoslav political leadership under such conditions may seem large. Yet it is a curious perversion of the usual appraisals of Leninist systems (which contend that such systems are uniquely incapable of handling leadership transitions) to argue that a prospective "non-Leninist" succession in Yugoslavia is foredoomed. In Yugoslavia's multinational, decentralized circumstances, it is only such a "non-Leninist" succession that will permit the Yugoslav political system to function.

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[1] The military itself cannot, however, play a dominant role, for the same reasons that a political "strong man" cannot. I have discussed the role of the military in The Role of the Military in Communist Yugoslavia: An Historical Sketch, The Rand Corporation, P-6070, January 1978.

[2] Dennison Rusinow, The Yugoslav Experiment, 1948-1974, University of California Press, 1977, p. 346.